

Turtle Sniffer

Specially trained dog helps find Kemp's ridley nests.



Every year, more than a hundred volunteers and staff members patrol Padre Island National Seashore in search of Kemp's ridley sea turtle nests. The turtles often descend on the beaches all at once in groups called *arribadas* (Spanish for "arrival"). They also tend to nest on the windiest days, causing their already shallow tracks to blow quickly into oblivion.

To increase the odds of finding the nests — and saving the eggs — biologist Donna Shaver of the U.S. National Park Service decided to try a new search tool: her dog's nose.

Inspired by the bomb-sniffing and drug-sniffing dogs utilized by other government agencies, such as the FBI, Shaver started training her Cairn terrier (named Ridley) to find Kemp's ridley nests. First she taught him to find treats on the beach. Then she placed treats in excavated turtle nests, and he quickly learned to locate them. Finally he mastered the far trickier task of finding actual turtle nests buried under

the sand. To familiarize the dog with the unique smells associated with turtle nests, Shaver took him to dozens of nest sites and to the incubation site where the eggs are kept until release.

Along the 70-mile national seashore, the nests are often several miles apart, and the heat can be brutal, particularly on dogs. Ridley is only called in when conditions are right: after human volunteers have given up their search and the wind has subsided enough for him to catch the scent. His first real-world test came on June 7, 2007. The staff received a report of a nesting turtle, but by the time they got to the site, the tracks had entirely blown away. Five staff members dug in the sand for five hours and found nothing. Ultimately they decided to enlist the help of the master sniffer. Ridley quickly led the searchers to the nest site, but they'd already looked in that area and thought the dog was mistaken. Three times the handler led Ridley away from the nest site, and three times the little dog went right

back, finally pawing insistently at the sand himself. When the staff members dug where Ridley demanded, 101 eggs were discovered. If they had been left alone in this heavily trafficked area, it's unlikely that any of the hatchlings would have survived. Thanks to Ridley, the eggs were transported to the incubation site, and later that summer, 91 of the hatchlings were released.

A puppy named Kayleigh is now in training to be the next egg-sniffing dog. Shaver hopes both Ridley and Kayleigh will be available to help in the 2009 nesting season.

Kemp's ridley sea turtles nest between April and mid-July along the coasts of Mexico and Texas. If you spot a nesting sea turtle, report it immediately by calling 1-866-TURTLE-5. ★

—Angela R. Garcia